

Young people, love and television series. The incidence of media literacy on the (re)interpretation of TV love relationships¹

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Abstract

Television series convey stereotyped representations of love relationships which viewers can identify with. Adolescents in particular may view these portrayals as models according to which they may choose to construct and/or change their own identity. This study reflects on the ability of young viewers to decode the discursive strategies of TV series and to be involved in the construction and acceptance of stereotyped love relationships. Our conclusions are founded on the analyses of several focus groups conducted with young university students. These focus groups were especially designed to understand their level of media literacy and their ability to think critically about stereotyped love relationships.

Keywords:

Media literacy, young viewers, fiction TV series, love relationships.

Resum

Les sèries de televisió ofereixen estereotips amb els quals els teleespectadors, especialment els joves, es poden identificar, i que els permeten construir i/o modificar la seva identitat en funció d'aquests models rebuts. Aquest estudi reflexiona sobre la capacitat dels joves teleespectadors de descodificar les estratègies discursives de la ficció seriada i de ser participants en l'acceptació i la construcció d'estereotips amorosos. La reflexió sorgeix de l'elaboració i de l'anàlisi de diversos focus groups amb joves universitaris amb la intenció de comprendre'n el grau d'alfabetització mediàtica i la capacitat de pensar críticament sobre els estereotips amorosos.

Paraules clau

Alfabetització audiovisual, joventut, sèries de ficció televisiva, relacions amoroses.

1. Introducció

"There are people who would never have fallen in love if they had not heard there was such a thing"
(La Rochefoucauld, a Illouz 2009, 209)

The postmodern scenario is the environment where emotions and the need to "feel" take on particular importance. It comes as no surprise that these are the times of psychology, "emotional intelligence", coaching, psychotherapies, etc. In academic debate regarding the social functions of the media, values and uses explicitly related to emotional communication have also been considered. Considerations based on both psychology and sociology and communication theory, which speaks of the rise of the *emotional sphere* and the construction of a self narrative (Bauman 2001; Illouz 2008; Sibilia 2008; Touraine

and Khosrokhavar 2002). Through emotional experiences we gradually construct a kind of *emotional architecture* that will individualise us and differentiate us from the rest. One of the most relevant characteristics of our time is, in fact, the progressive consolidation of "personal internal space" as an individual's principle demand.

Together with today's individualism, we can also recognise social and cultural markers that influence both the production of aspects of personal identity per se and also how they affect what we should expect from a specific situation. If today's individualism is characterised by personalisation based on freedom of choice, on abandoning old social conventions and on the possibility to "create oneself" continuously and flexibly (Lipovetsky 2002), we feel it is pertinent to ask ourselves about the management of media influence as mechanisms to reproduce identity that offer images to identify with and negotiation processes that allow the receiver to reproduce and/or

innovate the models received. Does today's quest for maximum differentiation exist side by side with a collective imaginary? Does this collective imaginary feed audiovisual fiction? It seems that, in this new *postmodern culture of compulsory personalisation*, we must ask ourselves how this is represented in the media.

In previous studies we have attempted to observe the discourse regarding the emotions expressed in contemporary audiovisual narrative. Based on fiction TV series, we have extensively reflected on the types of emotions in play in love relationships (Medina [et al.] 2007, 2008) and, more recently, on the models of parenthood, particularly on motherhood (Aran [et al.] 2009), always analysing their representation in fiction series. Based on the work by Williams (1975) and Ang (1985), we have constructed a category-based model (Medina [et al.] 2007, 23-24) in which three levels of analysis interact:

- The structure of social feeling (ESS in Catalan) or the general framework shared by most of society regarding a theme, in our case the construction of love relationships, and which forms part of the dominant feeling;
- The structure of narrative feeling (ENS) or an analysis of the media story and how media text tackles the reality under analysis (in our case, the feeling of love);
- The structure of experienced feeling (ESV), in other words, how media stories are interpreted by specific social actors, how they react to TV narrative and how they creatively (re)interpret the structure of social feeling.

The main aim of this work is focused essentially on the third level of analysis of the category-based model ("the structure of experienced feeling" or ESV); in other words, a study of **the ability of young TV viewers to decode the discursive strategies of fiction series as participants in the construction of stereotyped love relationships**.

Our research findings have helped us to understand to what extent young people are active interpreters of the messages reaching them regarding stereotyped love relationships (symbolic violence, love relationships, stereotypes of genre and of sexual options, etc.) through fiction TV series; where the references come from that are used to make these interpretations and whether they are related to the person's degree of media education. To achieve this aim, we are looking at a young target aged between 20 and 23, from different first degree university courses, some with an education in media (communication faculty) and others with no media education in their curriculum (faculties of fine arts, architecture and economics) in order to discover the similarities or differences in their interpretative procedures, gathering data by means of focus groups.

Finally, we also look at the relationship between the love models represented and the associated emotional discourses detected in the study sample, as well as the new social realities in the individual practice of love.

2. The role of media education in managing emotional representations of love

Our research group's interest in "social imaginaries" relates directly to the study of viewers' ability to recognise normative images and ideas at a social level in media representations. On previous occasions, we have argued that TV fiction is a field of study that has yet to be explored via an analysis of emotions (Galán 2007; García Rubio 2007; Luengo 2001; Medina [et al.] 2007). In this research, we are particularly interested in observing discourse regarding the typology of emotions projected in constructing fictional models of love. We understand fiction as a space that is nourished from, contributes to or anticipates the social reality via mechanisms of credibility, more or less contained or subjected to the sensationalisation of feelings.

Why is our target young people? Several authors, among whom we may highlight Morley (1986), Lull (1990) and Silverstone (1994), have extensively investigated the real link between everyday life and television's influence on the domestic space and its actors. Others point out how Silverstone's life models largely come from fiction series and even describe these spaces of entertainment as "poetic places where identity and subjects of family interest come together" (Gutiérrez and Medina 2007, 659). The characteristics of TV series, such as redundant, repetitive plots (Tous 2008-2009, 59), do not only aid the memory but also the recurrence of models. The process of constructing identity aims directly at a young target. Through TV images, young people (particularly teenagers but young people in general) can wander through the different social models and alternatives and "opt" for that identity they believe can give them security and value within their peer group. It is this dimension of the audiovisual text as cultural text that has underlies the direction of this research.

Hence also our interest in asking ourselves about the effectiveness of this relationship between media content and social reality, in relating the young audience and the fictional representation of love relationships. For example, is the narrative regarding different ways of loving fed by any aspect other than by the redundancy of models? In addition to the redundancy of models, is it possible to see a contradiction between the fictional representations of these ways of loving in terms of the social space? Moreover, do we find examples of genuine anticipation of new ways of understanding love relationships or of minority models? What is the role of gender and ideology markers? In practice, are these "new forms of social visibility" new because they exceed the previous forms or simply because they add to them?

2.1. The notion of media literacy

From our perspective, in the dialogue between media content and social reality, not only are TV viewers required with a certain type of TV consumption but also a certain activation of the function of referentiality. This is how the term *media literacy* is understood, as the result of a broader process, namely media

education. David Buckingham defines media education as the process of teaching and learning about the media; media literacy is the outcome, the media knowledge and skills learners acquire (Buckingham 2003, 21).

According to Buckingham (2003, 38), media literacy requires analysis, evaluation and critical thought. This researcher proposes dividing the broader notion of media education into four key concepts. These key concepts, adapted from his paper "Media education in the age of digital technology" (2006), are as follows:

A. Representation. All media, including electronic and digital, represent the world and do not merely reflect it. This necessarily leads to questions regarding the voices to be heard and the points of view to be represented.

B. Language. A truly literate individual is capable not only of using language but also of understanding how it works. Consequently, digital literacy must also include systematic knowledge of how the media are constructed and of the exceptional "rhetoric" of communication.

C. Production. Literacy also involves understanding who is communicating to whom and why. Within the context of the digital media, young people must be aware of the growing importance of commercial influences, especially when these are often invisible to the user. This awareness must also extend to non-commercial sources and interest groups that use the media, and increasingly the internet, as a means of persuasion and influence.

D. Audience. Finally, critical literacy involves understanding how audiences are placed centre stage and how real audiences respond. This leads us far beyond the notion of "audience" as conventionally understood in media and culture studies.

What can be deduced from this list of key concepts, as stated by Buckingham (2003, 141) on Vygotsky's distinction between spontaneous and scientific concepts, is that media education can be seen as a process that helps to make implicit media knowledge explicit and, as from this initial stage of commitment, can help to systematise and generalise this knowledge and even lead to its enlargement and enhancement.

2.1.1. The notion of competence in audiovisual communication

In Catalonia, a pioneer in Spain in the development and implementation of media education in compulsory education, a distinction is made in the audiovisual area between the so-called *competence in audiovisual communication*, which is located in the sphere of concepts, of procedures, and attitudes related to what are considered to be the six dimensions of audiovisual communication. These six dimensions, although they should not be seen as separate compartments, are: language, technology, production and programming processes, ideology and values, reception and audience and, finally, the aesthetic dimension. Hence we speak of competence in audiovisual communication (CA in Catalan) as an individual's ability to interpret and analyse based on the critical reflection of audiovisual images

and messages and to express oneself with minimal correctness in the communicative area (Ferrés 2005).² As we can see, this definition almost totally coincides with the meaning of the term *media literacy*. In fact, and as pointed out by Magda Blanes (2007, 13), the document, produced by various experts throughout Spain and coordinated by Professor Joan Ferrés, is based on general objectives that constitute competence and on internationally proposed content, based on documents by UNESCO and authors and groups related to media literacy, as would be the case of Professor Buckingham, among others.

José Ignacio Aguaded, another of the media literacy pioneers, also believes that "the concept of *communicative competence* can be seen as the most appropriate orientation for the suitable integration of audiovisual messages within education" (2005, 33). And in referring to a *new media literacy*, José Manuel Pérez Tornero highlights the notion of appropriation as the mainstay of what we have seen in Buckingham in the sum of analysis and participation: "the ability to interpret and to create are united; and the best expression is the concept of appropriation. Appropriation, personal and collective, of the new possibilities offered by the media; *appropriation* aimed at serving individuals' conscious goals and objectives". (2008, 23)

We have structured the analysis and conclusions of our experience based on the development of Buckingham's proposal and with reference to the notion of competence in audiovisual communication.

3. Methodology and procedures

The approach for our research has covered the perceptions of young university TV viewers on the representation of love relationships in fiction TV series based on the access they have given us to their personal opinions, of a public or group nature (by means of four focus groups). The procedure followed was, firstly, to select the audiovisual corpus that would be shown to the subjects and, secondly, to obtain the participants, who volunteered in the different universities via the lecturers on the research team and collaborating lecturers, and without knowing the characteristics of the research. Via email, they were invited to participate in the focus groups in a classroom at the respective universities.

The fundamental variable was whether the university students had media competence, given that the main aim was to analyse their ability to decode the discursive strategies of fiction series in terms of love relationships. As a secondary aim, we wished to observe whether those people who had received media literacy training (communication students) would decode differently to students without training in communication.

We have assumed that the value of the results of the focus groups will always be contextual (Callejo 2001) and, from a constructivist approach, we have approached the analysis of the language not as a transparent way of representing reality but as a construction of this reality or experience that gives it

meaning. A "substantive" representativeness in statistics terms aims, in particular, to understand the statements individually (Corbetta 2003). We agree with the evaluation made by David Buckingham and Sara Bragg (2004) of similar research, in that case based on self-reporting, in which they point out how, even with the varied and variable interpretation made by participants (and researchers, with different methodologies), some categories can be recognised for talking about (and constructing oneself in relation to) the media representations of love, sexuality and relationships.

3.1. Audiovisual corpus

Our research methodology applies an analytical model of fiction formulated from previous studies carried out by the RETEVIS research group (Medina [et al.] 2007, 2008), which helps to analyse the content of narrative structures and illustrates their application in current series with an extensive audience, as the central thread for our critical look at these social constructions. On this occasion, the series analysed and used as a reference are two produced by US companies, *Desperate Housewives*³ and *Brothers & Sisters*⁴, and one from Catalonia, *Porca misèria*.⁵

The sample analysed comes from the first season of all three series: a total of 20 episodes in the case of *Desperate Housewives*, 23 episodes of *Brothers & Sisters* and 18 of *Porca misèria*.

Selection criteria:

- Theme: these are current fiction TV series in urban settings that present us with female stars, inviting viewers to reflect on women and on love relationships in general, without the plot being focused on the professional sphere.
- Narrative: the narrative structure of the series chosen allows us to compare two different kinds of plot structure: plural in the various interconnected central plots of *Porca misèria* (couples as nuclei) and *Desperate Housewives* (family nuclei), and choral in *Brothers & Sisters* based on a matrix nucleus, the family group and the mother, respectively, which connects with other dependent family nucleuses.
- Symbolic: both from the point of view of where the series are produced, specifically the US series, as well as how they have been received and/or distributed, these series are emblematic of the audiovisual industry's intensive power (and extensive power in the case of the two US series) and of the dominant discourses that, mostly from the US, set trends. The fact that these series have been well received by TV viewers and internet users, as can be seen in the audience figures (see the end notes describing each series) corroborate the extensive spread and implementation of this reference, be it at a national or international level.

The specific selection of the sequences or clips, always from the first season of each series, was based on the following criteria:

- Representativeness of the love relationship models, in accordance with Sternberg's model:⁶ the first two examples (*Desperate Housewives* and *Brothers & Sisters*) relate, to dif-

fering degrees, to the notion of romantic love; the third example (*Porca misèria*) shows "friendship-based" love in a young but stable couple. Kinds of couples: older heterosexual, young homosexual and young heterosexual, respectively.

- Intelligibility (without being self-conclusive scenes, they provide the minimum of elements to be able to be understood out of context)
- Similar duration and length (none lasts longer than three minutes).

In accordance with these criteria, the following were chosen: from *Desperate Housewives*, episode 4, "Idyllic images" – a dialogue between Susan and Mike about a dinner they have been invited to and reference to an incident that had happened to Susan that morning – (minutes 00:31:23-00:32:38); from *Brothers & Sisters*, episode 3, "State relations" – a dialogue between Kevin Walker and Scotty regarding the patriarch Walker – (minutes 00:28:15-00:28:56); from *Porca misèria*, episode 6, "Errare humanum est" – a dialogue between Pere and Laia about her scientific discovery and the twists and turns of a script – (minutes 00:32:48:13-00:35:10:22).

3.2. Participants

Selection criteria:

University students in their second cycle from four disciplines (Communication, C; Fine Arts, BA; Architecture, Q, and Economics, E), one of them (Communication) whose curriculum contained media education. The respective universities are both public (UB, UPC, UPF) and private (URL).

Aged between 20 and 23 years.

Gender balance (n= 40, 17 male and 23 female).

The prevailing differential was the course being studied, in accordance with the aim of the research.

Implementation (November 2009 - February 2010):

Focus group (4), with an average of 8 participants for 60 minutes after viewing the scenes (in a classroom at the respective faculties) discussing their impressions and the fictional representation of the models of love relationships, as well as the function and interpretation of the expressive codes, aesthetic resources and ideological implications present in the three audiovisual examples.

As this was a focus group, there was no set list of questions but the sessions were structured around the following questions, via which themes arose such as the narration of fiction and stereotypes:

- What happens in the scene?
- What do the characters talk about?
- Kind of relationship between the characters shown in each scene.
- What information are we given about the characters and their relationship?

- Via what (point of view...) are we explained the story that is happening in the scene? And the recognition of a literal point of view (camera position), functional point of view (of a character...) or ideological point of view (director, scriptwriters...) regarding the characters, relationships and situations. For example, if they notice that any character wishes to appear nice, pathetic, fragile, strong

- How are the situations resolved? (Or what signs lead us towards possible solutions)

Once all three samples have been viewed:

- What do the three scenes have in common?
- What differences do they have?
- Are they similar or different kinds of relationships?
- Are the relationships between the characters explained in the same or similar way in the three examples?
- Do you know the three series? Titles and where they were originally produced, their nationality? Can you say what kind of audience you think they are aimed at? Similar series you know?
- What series do you watch?

Analysis and interpretation:

Analysis of the qualitative data (program N'Vivo 8.0), based on a video and sound recording of the focus groups, regarding the interpretative strategies of television series discourse by participants. Comparing the results among the members of the research team (50% took part in the focus groups, the other half took part *a posteriori* to validate their analyses) by means of the categories proposed by David Buckingham (2003, 38): a) representation, b) language, c) production and d) audience.⁷

4. Results

In this research, we have focused on the interpretations of young university students in three scenes from TV series that represent models of love relationships. Using a focus group methodology, and in order to discover the influence media literacy might have on the construction of these interpretations of love in fiction TV series, we must necessarily talk of results with "substantive" representativeness (see the methodology). Nevertheless, given the scope, and so as not to exceed the aims of this article, here we will refer to representation and language, out of the four broad concepts observed in the two abilities highlighted:

A. Representation (how the media represent the world)

- Critical commitment to the themes and strategies of fiction TV discourse (questions essentially referring to gender and sexual identity, social class, nationality and dominant ideology. No references appear to identity-based aspects of an ethnic or racial nature).

MaleQ1: But I, for example, see the programme in the sense of "I make series, pack of gays"; I mean, if it's just another character in the story that can disappear, appear or another suddenly appears or whatever. Well, and then we go onto a season of 6 episodes without gays and we're happy. Well, that's that, but it does seem like I have to have my pack of gays all the time and, as soon as one goes, they hurriedly stick in another...

FemaleQ1: They have to deal with all themes; like, there's been... I don't know... some problem ...

MaleQ2: But of course it's a theme, it's about the cast ...

- Ability to infer relationships between the stylistic, content and ideological aspects and the social framework (for example, in the enclosed extract, the compositional setting of the scene for an amorous meeting at the foot of some stairs is translated in accordance with the conventions of romantic love)

MaleQ1: In fact, in the first one (DH) it's the girl who's above, who receives the action and in the second one (B&S) she's below. It seems more natural below, doesn't it? Because the guy who's above, it's like he's marking out that thing of: "I'm attacking you". So perhaps the one who's attacking is also, also waiting in the first one... I don't know, they're things... [...]

MaleQ2: Like a knight accompanying the girl to ...

- Knowledge of the potential and social meaning of the media's dominant, hegemonic trend.

MaleQ1: But I think it also goes beyond women, an audience parallel to what the series expresses, of the same characteristics.

MaleQ2: No, of the same characteristics, no. I mean, it's made precisely for those who don't have the same ... mmm... so that you actually dream of that.

Male1: [...] I don't know, it's very American and they broadcast it here. I don't know, the people here, how can they be interested in this if the stereotype is so marked? [...]

Someone: Escapism...

B. Language (of how literate people use the "language" and understand how it works)

- Practical understanding of the mechanisms to construct fictional content, particularly in terms of constructing plots and producing scripts and constructing characters (e.g. they spontaneously mention notions such as "ingredients", "development", "outcome", "hook", they can see the planned construction of characters and point out links between "new characters" and social reality).

MaleC2: [...] I think series use characters that are stereotypes of real life, for example, immigrants. Now they include immigrants as character. Also, 10 years ago there were hardly any homosexuals in a series and now, suddenly, every series has one.

-Moderate knowledge of the expressive and technical resources of audiovisual language (comments on the castings as well as on the use of music and framing to underline emotions or as style markers).

FemaleC1: Well, of course, blonds, blue eyes, but not everyone... [...] (Los Soprano), they're all really ugly and the series is great... I dunno... it's the lighting... it's also the change, the way of life... the shots, the shots are too close ...

GirlB2: In the last series we saw (PM), it was much more everyday ... the mere fact that one of the characters had his back to the camera for half the scene is like, it makes the scene more everyday, like the camera doesn't matter, because what's interesting is the conversations they're having with each other and that gives it an extra touch...

- Applied knowledge of some narrative criteria.

MaleE1: It's still... or rather, the American series are based on the cinema, right? And they're still influenced by all the cinematographic fiction of that ...

- Practical understanding of the mechanisms for constructing fiction audiovisual formats, particularly serialised formats.

MaleQ2: I mean, really the moment (in B&S), I think it's slow, the series is 40 minutes and the episode is complete, I mean, you know it stops..

MaleQ1: Compared with the other one, with Desperate Housewives or... it's like it's developed much more slowly.... much denser ...

- Ability to relate particular observations regarding style and content of the audiovisual discourse within a wide social context.

FemaleC3: Do you watch Física o Química? I think it's a terrible series because it gives a very bad view of, shall we say, stereotypes. There's all the different kinds of character: the gay, the rebel, the one who takes drugs, the amazing looking female who ends up having a fling with 30 and, of course, I think that gives a really bad image and maybe it's a sign of the future because, I swear, I don't think it's like that yet. But maybe in 10 years' time it will be like that.

With regard to the groups in terms of origin, among the communication students we observed more knowledge (logical, due to curriculum design and area of interest) of the aesthetic and technical dimensions of audiovisual language, as well as of the content in terms of the kind of medium, functions and genres. Knowledge of narrative criteria is quite generalised in all four specialities, particularly regarding strategies for serialised programmes and the construction of stereotypical characters. On the other hand, the participants in the different focus groups did not refer to production criteria (C), except for the odd reference from the communication group. Practically the same thing happens regarding the audience (D). Here, the degree of belief in the creative potential of the media as innovative social

agents is almost inappreciable. Finally, reflections on ideology and values are overrepresented in the fine arts group compared with the rest of the groups, an aspect we cover in the following conclusions section.

5. Conclusions

The aim of our research has been to analyse the media competence of university students (specifically those studying fine arts, communication, architecture and economics) to decode the discursive strategies of serialised fiction regarding love relationships. As from this initial objective, we also set ourselves a secondary goal focusing on discovering whether those people receiving media literacy training (communication students) decoded differently from students without communication training. It should be remembered that this research focuses not so much on analysing the different kinds of love-related discourse appearing in audiovisual fiction but rather on how these are interpreted by young people and whether they make inferences regarding the internalisation of behavioural patterns.

With regard to our primary objective, of the four concepts observed (representation, language, production and audience), students of the four specialities have quite generalised knowledge of the first two; specifically, regarding the construction of stereotypical characters (representation) and serialisation-related strategies (language). We have already pointed out that none of the participants had received specific media education during their compulsory education.

With regard to the secondary aim, greater competence can be observed among the communication students in the aesthetic and technical dimensions of audiovisual language, as well as in content referring to the kind of medium, functions and genres. It is also the communication group, together with that of fine arts, that most clearly recognises gender stereotypes in fictional representations. But the identification of gender stereotypes as markers of a rather unequal kind of love relationship (such as the case of the scene from *Desperate Housewives*) has been expressed as manifestly critical and mostly only among the fine arts students. The difference between the two groups can be explained by the fine art students having taken degree subjects with co-education content, something we discovered after analysing the results.

This aspect, which we discovered indirectly and unexpectedly in our results, connects with a recent study by the Universidad Complutense in Madrid and the Ministry of Equality (July 2010) which considers students that have worked on this issue in class to be more protected from gender-based violence (40.9% of the secondary school students interviewed). Skill and specific training in audiovisual consumption are important indeed we would say fundamental tools in today's social scenario. But education that raises the awareness of discriminatory practices seems to be a vital requirement to consolidating a critical spirit in terms of love relationships. We know that, in

acquiring behavioural patterns, the three pillars of reference have been parents, friends and education. Traditional pillars of reference to which are ostensibly added the mass media, most especially television and increasingly social networks via the internet. Observing how young people interact given these agents of socialisation and what influence this might have on their degree of media literacy can help us to understand the viewer-based mechanisms at work (regarding the consumption of serialised fiction) within an environment of gender and sexual identity markers in the representation of love relationships.

In summary, the fact that they talk more about aesthetic aspects than ideological (or regarding values), that they find it difficult to recognise their practices as TV viewers as a part of public behaviour and audience trends, that they clearly prefer escapism as a gratifying element of the consumption of TV fiction, avoiding any mention of something so ancient as what used to be called "the message". All this might lead us to give in to a certain disappointment. Is there anything else in the media opulence pointed out by Baudrillard (1996) when observing two unique trends in postmodern society: iconic densification and dumbing down? But it is precisely here where social science researchers have the most work to do, especially those of us already at a generational distance from young people. Surely it's a question of not allowing ourselves to be carried away by our own moral judgements and of understanding that television is especially seen as entertainment by young people. But the fact that they have a good time (in the case of comedies) or suffer (in the case of suspense) does not mean they are not benefitting from it in socio-educational terms. There has been extensive misuse of pedagogy that, based on a critical interpretation of the media, aimed to redeem society of all its ills. Surely what is still notably lacking is the so-called **"social self-understanding" of the students**, in accordance with the term coined by Chris Richards and used by Buckingham (2003, 147). **What is lacking is "a socially located understanding of their own media consumption practices in the context of broader cultural and social relationships"**.

And, at the same time, as pointed out by Buckingham, a more inquisitive focus should be encouraged of certain popular debates regarding the "effects" of the media. One proposal, which is no longer in the distant future but rather in the immediate present, would be that the leadership exercised for years by Catalonia in spreading media education within compulsory education should not now become discouraged within a context fascinated by the technological apparatus offered by communication technologies, especially in digital environments. In fact, this context requires us not to become complacent but to keep up the tension and increase our demands for genuine media education, particularly essential in the training of teachers and students at a primary and secondary level, in order to ensure that citizens are media literate, something now required by recent European legislation, basic but highly recommendable for (self-)demanding viewer practices. We must remember that, due to their age, our participating students did not bene-

fit from media education during their compulsory education. It will therefore be pertinent to carry out comparative studies with the generations that follow. Even more so given that the new European framework legislation (Audiovisual Media Services Directive 2007/65/EC, of the European Parliament) obliges the Commission to submit a report on the levels of media literacy of all Member States (article 26: not later than 19 December 2011 and every three years thereafter), media literacy being understood as the skills, knowledge and understanding that allow consumers to use media effectively. We believe that this demand is not seen as a mere procedure but enables the real implementation of the meaning and need for media education. Finally, **media literacy, understood within a framework of a skills-enhancing and not limiting media education, appears as a powerful but not miraculous tool to understand not only television as device but especially viewer-based mechanisms and, at the same time, the consumption practices of the new audiences.**

Notes

- 1 This research has been possible thanks to the aid granted by the CAC to the Representacions Televisives i Imaginaris Socials (RETEVIS) research group at Universitat Ramon Llull in the Sixth Call for Grants for Research Projects into Audiovisual Communication in 2009. The team for this research project is made up of Sue Aran, Montserrat Guillén, Rosa-Àuria Munté (URL), Pilar Medina and Miquel Rodrigo (UPF), Cristina Jover (UPC) and Montserrat López (UB). With general thanks to the 40 students who took part in it (see the research at www.cac.cat).
- 2 As a complement, see also the research by Anna Tous (2009).
- 3 *Desperate Housewives (DH)* is a US series broadcast by the ABC network since 2004. It is about how, in the community living on Wisteria Lane, there is a group of four women and how we can access, through their points of view, the experiences of love and family relationships. It is a comedy drama and the first season was broadcast in Spain by TVE, on La 1 (2005), and its average audience totalled 2,566,000 viewers with an average share of 21.1% (data from www.formulatv.com, 2005).
- 4 US series that started broadcasting in 2006 and has been shown by ABC and Fox. The main family, the Walkers, are led by Nora, the matriarch, and the clan made up of the five children and their respective family ties. This is a dramatic fiction with humorous elements and, in Spain, the first season was broadcast openly by Cuatro (2007, three months previously by the subscriber channel, Fox) and achieved an average audience of 1,027,000 viewers and an average share of 8.4% (data from www.formulatv.com, 2007).
- 5 TV3 series produced by Arriska Films and directed by Joel Joan. It was first broadcast in November 2004. It's about the ups and downs of a main couple: Pere (TV scriptwriter) and Laia (research biologist) and their friends. It is a dramatic fiction with touches of humour, which achieved an average audience of 488,000 viewers and an average share of 16.8% (data from Sofres, 2006-2007).

- 6 To extend the categorisations regarding the type of love relationships, see MEDINA, P. [et al.] (2007), based on Sternberg (1989, 2000).
- 7 For reasons of space, we have focused this work on the data obtained regarding the capacity of young TV viewers to decode the discursive strategies of serialised fiction as participants in constructing stereotypes in love relationships. The complete research work can be consulted at www.cac.cat.

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